
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	Joel Elias Spingarn High School	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	801 26th Street, NE	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent
Meeting Date:	April 4, 2013	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept
Case Number:	13-004	<input type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Andrew Lewis	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Construction
		<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition

On November 1, 2012, the Historic Preservation Review Board accepted Spingarn High School as the site for the new streetcar car barn and training center that is being proposed by the District of Columbia Department of Transportation (DDOT). However, the Board also provided a number of comments regarding ways the design could be improved. ZGF Architects has revised the car barn designs on behalf of DDOT and is seeking further comments from the Board.

Property Description

Spingarn High School was constructed in 1951-1952 and was the first new senior high school built for African American students in the school district in thirty-six years. Based upon a design developed by municipal architect Nathan C. Wyeth, Spingarn was also the last post-war school in the District of Columbia to be constructed in the Colonial Revival Style. This style relates to the three 1930's schools that are located immediately to the north - Charles Young Elementary School, Seth L. Phelps Vocational School, and Hugh M. Browne Junior High School. Spingarn's location and design enhances the schools' picturesque, campus-like setting which is composed of a related architectural vocabulary and the extensive open spaces that surround all of the buildings, including the open area formed by the adjacent Langston Golf Course.

Proposal

The Board's earlier comments emphasized the valuable contribution of the open green space to the Spingarn campus and recommended that the car barn be more effectively integrated into this setting, reduced in size and more contextually related to the surrounding buildings. The original car barn concept was also identified as insufficiently civic in nature. The Board further suggested investigating whether some functions (e.g. outdoor rail yards, parking) could be made smaller, concealed through berming and landscaping, or located elsewhere, and whether certain infrastructural elements, such as fencing, poles, and wires, could be simplified, revised to minimize the loss of green space and reduced in visual impact.

The original carbarn designs have been significantly revised to respond to the Board's comments. In fact, two concepts have been developed to provide a broad range of alternative approaches for improving and better integrating the carbarn facility into its site. The first concept is referred to as "Scheme 1 – Vertical/Civic" and the second is known as "Scheme 2 – Horizontal/Podium."

Evaluation

Both schemes feature a number of common revisions such as:

- incorporating refined siting based upon sight lines to prominent architectural features of Spingarn and its campus;
- shifting the entry from 26th Street to Benning Road and reducing parking so that a continuous strip of green space will frame the carbarn and more directly link it to the open Spingarn campus;
- incorporating an entry porch, grand stairs and formal plaza to impart a civic nature to the building;
- screening and framing views to Langston Terrace through a more refined landscape plan and a reoriented power sub-station building; establishing views through the carbarn to emphasize the educational aspects of the training center and to feature interesting building elements such as Spingarn's greenhouse; and
- incorporating treatments such as reinforced turf, bio-retention landscaping, vine-covered fences and related approaches that will make the facility operate and appear more "green."

If funding becomes available, solar panels may also be incorporated into the facility, possibly in the sawtooth fashion that was featured in the earlier concepts or potentially incorporated into the open roof frame above the entry terrace to provide a trellis-like enclosure.

Architecturally, the two schemes share a similar vocabulary consisting primarily of brick that will match the Spingarn campus, large expanses of glass, and structural steel. Although the "style" of the buildings does not literally imitate the prevalent Colonial Revival, a degree of stylistically-contrasted compatibility is achieved through massing, proportion, materials, siting and related approaches. It is the differences between the two schemes, however, that result in a variety of elements that could be considered to better relate to the established architectural context than others.

For example, the fact that every school on the campus is oriented east toward 26th Street places a great deal of importance on the carbarn's east elevation, and it could be argued that the taller windows of Scheme 1 more closely relate to the monumental pilasters and columns that form the primary elevations of the historic schools. The heavy emphasis placed on the verticality of Scheme 1 may also be viewed as more of a civic statement than that of the other approach.

On the other hand, Spingarn is characterized by a heavy limestone base, especially on its south elevation, and a visual relationship to this element is clearly established by the more conspicuous “podium” proposed in Scheme 2. Similarly, the projecting roofline/clerestory of Scheme 2 could be viewed as more directly related to Spingarn’s prominent hipped roof form. When considered together, the podium and roof line/clerestory, also establish a very strong relationship to the prevailing horizontality that is characteristic of all of the historic schools.

In short, both schemes offer some advantages. By comparing differences between the two, other conclusions may be drawn regarding the degree to which one scheme is more or less related to the existing architectural context, deferential to the historic schools, civic in nature, appropriately scaled, integrated into the historic campus and improved overall. Perhaps, the ideal solution could result from an amalgamation of the best characteristics of both schemes? Regardless, staff believes both schemes represent a significant improvement over the earlier concept and considers the alterations that have been made to be in direct response to the Board’s earlier comments.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Board:

- *find the revised concepts for the car barn on the Spingarn site to be consistent with the purposes of the preservation act; and*
- *delegate final design development and refinements to staff, subject to comments made by the Board with regard to each of the two schemes and to other related matters.*